

Sub-Committee on Children and Families

Armed Services Sub-Committee on Personnel - Supporting Our Military Families

Bill Number: Oversight

Hearing Date: June 24, 2003 - 2:30 PM

Witness:

Michael J. Petrilli

Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Innovation and Improvement

U.S. Department of Education

Testimony:

Chairman Alexander, Chairman Chambliss, and Subcommittee Members, I am pleased to be here this afternoon to discuss the Troops-to-Teachers program, as part of your hearing on the impact of Federal laws and policies on military families raising children.

My position is Associate Deputy Under Secretary in the Office of Innovation and Improvement in the Department of Education. The mission of this new office is to identify, support, and promote promising innovations in elementary and secondary education. We are particularly interested in approaches that bring highly qualified individuals into teaching, including approaches that target non-traditional candidates and allow them to obtain teacher certification with a minimum of difficulty. Troops-to-Teachers is definitely one of those programs, and I am proud to say that the Bush Administration supports it enthusiastically.

As you know, the No Child Left Behind Act, passed by overwhelming bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress, challenges States to put plans in place to ensure that every teacher is "highly qualified" by the end of the 2005-2006 school year. This is an ambitious goal, and one that we can meet. But, as Secretary Paige has explained, in order to meet this goal, we must do things differently. First, States must raise academic standards for their teachers to ensure that they are prepared to teach challenging content to our students. Second, we must lower the barriers that keep thousands of talented individuals out of our classrooms. The Troops-to-Teachers program reflects both objectives.

The brave men and women who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their colleagues around the world, represent one of the most highly skilled, highly trained sectors of our society. Many of our servicemen and women possess a command of mathematics and science, subjects that are critical to our Nation's economic success in the 21st Century, and subjects for which there is a critical shortage of qualified teachers. The Troops-to-Teachers program promotes high standards by identifying and bringing these talented men and women, and their top-notch skills and abilities, into our Nation's public schools. The Troops-to-Teachers program also addresses the barriers that keep many talented people out of our schools. Unfortunately, for too long, States have relied on certification systems that seem to repel talent, rather than recruit talent. Please don't misunderstand: many teachers coming through traditional preparation programs and State certification systems are highly qualified indeed, and we owe them our gratitude for the work they do with our children. But the hoops and hurdles, the bureaucratic entanglements, the sometimes mindless requirements that find their way into State certification regimes keep countless numbers of potentially wonderful teachers from ever setting foot inside a classroom. That is a shame. Troops-to-Teachers helps cut through this red tape by placing critical personnel inside State departments of education, people who help retiring military

personnel negotiate the landmines of government bureaucracy and certification requirements. The program has also put helpful pressure on the States to open up new, streamlined “alternative” routes to certification that take less time, cost less, and are designed specifically for career-changing adults with lots of relevant skills and experience. (As I will explain later, however, many barriers remain that keep talented individuals, including those from Troops-to-Teachers, out of the classroom.)

With that context in mind, let me lay out some basic facts on how Troops-to-Teachers operates and what it has accomplished. Beginning in fiscal year 2002, the Congress has appropriated Troops-to-Teachers funds to the Department of Education; through a memorandum of understanding with the Defense Department, we transfer that money to DANTES, which handles day-to-day administration, as it has done since the program’s inception.

Troops-to-Teachers assists eligible military personnel in making the transition to teaching in public elementary and secondary schools. To be eligible, in general, a serviceman or woman must: (1) have retired from active or reserve service; (2) have separated from the service after six or more years of continuous duty and be willing to enter the reserves for at least three years; or (3) be currently serving in the reserves and have at least 10 years of active and reserve service and commit to continuing in the reserves for at least three more years. Program entrants must also hold a baccalaureate or advanced degree, except that those seeking to become vocational and technical education teachers qualify if they have at least one year of college, at least six years of military service in a vocational or technical field, or meet a State’s certification requirements for vocational and technical education teachers.

The program offers participants counseling, referral, and placement assistance in moving into their new teaching careers. In other words, it links military personnel with teacher preparation programs operating in the States in which they want to teach, and then with school systems seeking to hire Troops-to-Teachers participants. It provides these services through 33 State support offices that assist participants with State certification requirements and employment leads in a total of 44 States. DANTES also provides program information through a network of military education centers and transition offices, and maintains a Web page that provides information on job vacancies and includes model resumes and other information.

Participants can also receive stipends of up to \$5,000 to help them with the cost of certification expenses, or recruitment bonuses of up to \$10,000. Recipients of stipends must agree to teach full time in a school in a “high-need” school district for at least three years. Recipients of recruitment bonuses must commit to teaching full time for at least three years in a school that has at least 50 percent of its students living in poverty or that has a large percentage of children with disabilities.

What has the Troops-to-Teachers program accomplished in its almost ten years of existence? The Department of Education has not yet conducted a rigorous, scientific evaluation of the program – we have been involved with it only for the last two years – but the data on program participation and information from available studies are very impressive. Although, for five years, the program did not receive an appropriation sufficient to provide financial assistance to participants, Troops-to-Teachers has placed over 5,000 new teachers in classrooms, and many of them have filled needs that are of the highest priority in school districts and schools. For instance, some 44 percent of

placements have been in the hard-to-fill areas of mathematics, science, and special education. Participants are also heavily male and heavily minority; their presence thus addresses the need for more male and minority role models in the classroom. Retention rates have been good; as of 1999, 82 percent of participants who had entered teaching were still in the classroom. And, under the statute, Troops-to-Teachers participants who receive financial assistance must be placed in high-poverty schools and districts, which typically have the hardest time recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers. These basic statistics are backed up by positive findings from independent studies of the program. A 2001 General Accounting Office report found that the official records on participation in the program may actually understate the total number of military personnel who have benefited; they count only people who applied formally to the program, not other personnel who may have taken advantage of the counseling and placement services available but never submitted a formal application.

A 1998 national survey of Troops-to-Teachers participants by the independent National Center for Education Information found that participants had the types of attitudes and expectations that result in effective education. Participants believed that all children should be held, and can achieve, to high educational standards and that students' socioeconomic backgrounds should not prevent them from performing at the highest levels of achievement. It also found that teachers who had entered the profession through the program believed that they had achieved satisfactory relationships with students, parents, and other teachers, and that two-thirds intended to remain in teaching as long as they were able to do so or until retirement.

A survey in Texas found that school principals who had hired teachers through the program rated almost 60 percent of those teachers "Above Average" or "Outstanding." They considered program participants superior to other teachers (with comparable levels of experience) in such areas as "contribution to improvement of performance," "contributions to the school and community," and "classroom management." In a companion survey, 89 percent of Texas teachers who had entered teaching through the program reported that their last official performance rating was either outstanding or above average.

The Department's optimism that Troops-to-Teachers can become an important vehicle for helping to solve the teacher shortage problem, bringing non-traditional candidates into the teaching profession, and opening up new methods of training and licensing teachers is bolstered not only by these reports but also by some of the experiences of individuals who have gone through the program. To take one example, Michael Glaze left the Air Force after 19 years to become a third-grade teacher in Beaufort, South Carolina. Last school year, he was the "teacher of the year" at Beaufort Elementary School.

Other examples include seventeen-year Army veteran Eusabio Bretado who has taught math and social studies at Desert Hills Elementary School in the El Paso area. An immigrant from Mexico and a one-time high school dropout, he has received excellent performance ratings and his students have performed extremely well on Texas academic assessments. Douglas Kononos, after 20 years in the Air Force, has embarked on a second career teaching special education in New Braunfels, Texas. And Arthur Moore, who teaches special education in Baltimore, entered the profession, after a 24-year Army career, through an innovative alternative-preparation program operating in that city.

I hope these anecdotes convey to you why we are so excited about this program. But I must also stress that we do not want to rest on anecdotes. One of the key objectives of our new office is to determine, using scientifically based research and evaluation methodologies, what strategies and interventions in elementary and secondary education really work, and then try to capitalize on those success stories by encouraging their proliferation. So we have begun work with the Department's evaluation offices on the initiation of studies that hold Troops-to-Teachers to rigorous analytical standards. Before I finish, I should point out the remaining challenges confronting the Troops-to-Teachers program, and similar efforts to place nontraditional candidates in our nation's schools. In too many States, certification barriers remain high. Alternative certification programs—which allow teachers to earn their certification while they are teaching, and often include intensive mentoring by expert teachers—are an important step forward. Without them, troops would have to go back to education school for several years, a luxury that many men and women with families to support cannot afford. But oftentimes, these alternative programs are expensive and lengthy, and merely repackage traditional education school programs into a different (but still burdensome) arrangement. The Troops-to-Teachers stipends help with the cost, but many participants in these programs complain about attending evening classes that they see as adding very little value to their teaching.

What we desperately need are bold new approaches to certification, approaches that recognize the knowledge and skills that nontraditional candidates bring to the table, and approaches that focus more on results and competencies rather than on process and seat time. The Administration has tried to do its part in recent years by supporting some important initiatives in this area. For example, we made a five-year, \$10 million grant to the Western Governors University to support the launch of its online Teachers College. This virtual college allows individuals to earn their credentials by demonstrating their competency to teach through completion of courses or other creditable experiences. The competency assessments can be completed on line, any time, anywhere, and, combined with a teaching experience, can qualify an individual for a teaching position. This program is just getting off the ground, but imagine the possibilities it holds for the Troops-to-Teachers program. Military personnel stationed around the world, as they approach retirement, could take courses on line when off-duty and make great progress toward full State certification even before they return to civilian life. Only a handful of States have approved this program so far, but we hope the rest follow suit soon.

Similarly, the Department has made a two-year, \$5 million grant to the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence. The American Board is developing extremely rigorous assessments for new teachers, both in key academic areas and in professional teaching knowledge. If these assessments are adopted by States, individuals who pass them would be considered fully certified, and therefore highly qualified. Troops-to-Teachers participants could take and pass this online exam and head straight into the classroom. This kind of streamlined approach is the best and fastest way to turn our troops into teachers, but it depends on the willingness of the States to do things differently.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions the Subcommittees may have.